

Alabama's Jesse Owens outruns the bigots once again

Oakville, Ala. — It is bronze, beautiful and realistic, the way all statues should be. You see the runner's taut muscles, the determination in his face. You feel the significance of his victory.

Sculptor Branko Medenica outdid himself.

The sky is the blue of a bird's egg, the grounds deserted. This park may be a boon to Alabama tourism, but the crowd

must be due another day. So I take my time studying the statue, then a sparkling replica of the 1936 Olympic torch and, finally, a three-room, board-and-batten shack like the one where a champion was born.

It took me almost a year to get here to see

the Jesse Owens statue and surrounding memorial park, a work in progress in one form or another for 14 years. Last June the Olympic torch passed through Oakville, population 200, and Owens' widow and a truckload of dignitaries were on hand for the unveiling.

I was in France. To be honest, missing Jesse's big day was the only thing I regretted about leaving the country for a long vacation. I had gotten downright proprietary about this particular story. I wanted to see for myself the hoopla in Oakville, the timely unveiling of the hard-won tribute.

When school kids ask about my favor-



RHETA GRIMSLEY JOHNSON

ite column of the past 15 years, I have no ready answer. I remember fondly many subjects, but so many times the most fascinating people elude the pen. Often I feel only disappointment in the columns that result from really big moments or complex characters.

But I can tell them what I consider to be the most important column of my career. The date was 1982, the dateline Oakville, the subject Jesse Owens. The myth of the New South was punctured, at least in my own heart.

The memory of it bothers me even now, though this county in 1996 redeemed itself somewhat with genuine, biracial enthusiasm for the new park. But in 1982, it was a different story.

When a group of residents commissioned a memorial to native son Owens, white officials in the Lawrence County seat of Moulton would not allow it on the courthouse lawn. They feared, they said, "a flood of similar requests."

A group of elderly black Masons in Oakville made a place for it. They



RHETA GRIMSLEY JOHNSON / Staff

Statue is featured in state ads aimed at potential tourists.

carved a half-acre lot out of a cow pasture to make a place for the small obelisk. But before the unveiling, hoodlums in a pickup truck pulled it down.

I was there for the first ceremony. It was a glorious fall day. The Masons who had the pluck to see it through were there. The idea for the larger, fancier

park wasn't hatched for several years, until the Olympic connection could be made and state officials saw the sense of it.

As a Southerner, I always bristle at the suggestion my region holds some kind of monopoly on racism. It doesn't, of course.

But what happened here in North Alabama in 1982 had a nasty, anachronistic feel to it. (That was, of course, before talk radio made blatant racism socially acceptable again.) It hurt to hear there remained such a ridiculous bias, especially against an undisputed hero, the man who made Hitler look foolish, for heaven's sake.

Jesse Owens lived with his nine brothers and sisters in an Oakville shack until the family moved to Cleveland in search of better opportunities. Jesse was only 9 at the time.

This place remains a pocket of high unemployment and low wages. Despite its physical beauty, Lawrence County sure can use the shot in the arm any tourists might bring. State of Alabama tourism ads offer the Owens statue as an enticement.

Wouldn't it be sweet if the memorial that some did not want brought better times to Lawrence County? Maybe the next Jesse Owens won't have to go north in search of a decent life.

Johnson's column from Georgia and throughout the South runs Sunday, Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

The Atlanta Constitution, Sunday, 4/13/97